The World's Christians:

Strategies for Teaching International Graduate Students in Kenya's Christian Universities

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About the Author

Janice is a Phd candidate in Education at Africa International University. A missionary since 1995 in Tanzania and Kenya, she teaches church leaders and researches international education issues. Previously, she was a University of Minnesota Extension Assistant Professor.

The experiences of international graduate students in Africa are nearly nonexistence in the literature. In a case study of one Christian university in Kenya, I interviewed international graduate students and conducted participant observations. I aimed to understand their learning experiences. I found that low English proficiency plagued many students, as did lack of academic writing and critical thinking skills. Students appreciated teachers who utilized the diverse learning community, gave clear guidance, and mentored them. In a follow-up study at four Christian universities in Nairobi, international graduate students and their teachers provided further strategies for promoting learning for this population.

Introduction

As globalization increases, faculty, students and ideas are crossing borders at faster rates than ever before. Yet, little research has been conducted on the effects of globalization on educational institutions and students in Africa. International student research has often focused on Africans studying in the USA or in Europe (McLachlan & Justice 2010; Terkla, Roscoe, & Etish-Andrews 2007; Zhao & Wildemeersch 2008). Yet many Bible schools, seminaries and Christian universities in Africa have had always been international. At the Christian university in Nairobi studied here, internationals (non-Kenyan passport holders) constitute 23% of the student body (Rasmussen 2014:4).

Research Purpose

Much money, time, and opportunity cost is spent to educate international students. Families, sponsors and churches sacrifice to send their members across borders for graduate education. Yet, little is known about the graduate international students' learning experiences. I sought to explore this. Later, I expanded the inquiry into three more Christian universities and included faculty members. I investigated the factors that hindered and facilitated their learning as well as effective teaching strategies.

Methodology

To better understand the learning experiences of international students at one Christian university, I designed a qualitative, interpretive case study. I conducted a preliminary study of five international students, after which I revised the interview

guide. Then in 2013 I interviewed thirteen graduate students living on the campus, who had studied there at least one term. The sample upheld my desire for nearly maximum variation in program, family status and country of origin. They spoke 13 languages, came from eight countries and had lived in seven others. Likewise, students had been influenced by various colonial educational systems. They came from a variety of previous schools, including denominational Bible schools, liberal arts colleges, secular universities, schools of ministry, and other theological schools (Rasmussen, 2014).

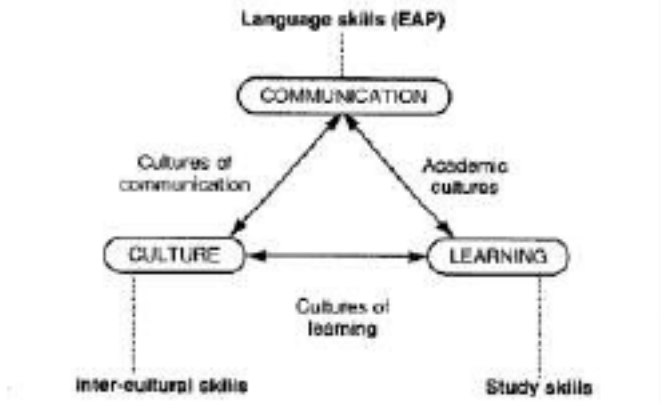
I also participated and took notes in the community for four years as a graduate student and as International Student Coordinator. After transcribing verbatim and coding all of the interviews and field notes using WEFTQDA software, I identified themes.

In a follow-up study, I built on this research by expanding my population to four evangelical Christian universities in Nairobi. I focused my inquiry on learning and teaching, still with international graduate students. To date in 2016, I have 33 faculty members and 27 students at four Christian universities in Nairobi. They represented an additional nine countries. I have taken notes on the interviews, but I am still in the process of transcribing and analyzing them.

Therefore, all findings and quotations are from the original study, but some preliminary findings from the follow-up study are included in the pedagogical implications. While specific to Christian universities in Nairobi, others from similar settings may explore whether some of the findings may be cautiously transferred.

Findings

I will discuss my findings from my original case study using an adaptation of a model (below) developed in the UK which describes international student experiences in higher education. The term "culture" is a bit vague here, but it highlights that there are agreed upon norms a group may expect without stating them. The three main categories include: academic expectations and study skills, communication issues and language skills, and cultural expectations: roles, values, and intercultural skills.



Academic Expectations and Study Skills

Academic institutions develop their own micro-cultures, with beliefs, values, expectations, practices and behaviors. These are often implicit, which is confusing for students who have not been a part of that culture. They may even clash with students' previously experienced academic cultures (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997:77; Carroll, 2005:26–27). Students in this case study experienced some of these expectation clashes in the structure of learning, the level of learning and the heavy work load.

Structure of learning.

Since the structure of learning was different from past experiences, most international students had to adapt their approaches to learning. Many came from systems that provided more guidance, so they had expected more direct teaching from their professors. This gap left them feeling somewhat abandoned. According one student, "You are teaching yourself, you have to teach yourself. That's the kind of learning process here. They just guide you" (M. Democratic Republic of Congo 2013). Those from French-speaking systems especially seemed to expect more guidance.

The faculty members in this study often challenged students to think critically in class. One student admitted, "Wrestling with professors in class about issues - at times I question myself and never thought that way . . . . It has just really changed me in thinking a different way" (Y. Malawi 2013). Some students had come from classes where rote learning was the norm. Students had been expected to recite back information to teachers. They were punished if they questioned their teachers (e.g. South Sudan). Classroom environments in the study varied and some Westerners had to learn not to challenge some of their teachers.

Various administrative issues in the education troubled students. Some had to adjust from semesters to terms. Overlapping demands stressed some. For example, many master's students felt overwhelmed researching and writing their theses while doing coursework. Doctoral students were surprised to have proposals and competency exams due simultaneously. Grading systems varied from their past experience, so it took time to figure out the meaning of grades. The credit transfer system confused some. Also, the meaning of "on time" varied. Some found that deadlines were more flexible than expected.

The small size of classes generally contributed to students' learning. Small class sizes enabled quality interactions between lecturers and students, and among students. This allowed for varied growth opportunities, such as oral presentations in seminars. Likewise, individualized attention from professors promoted learning.

> The teacher seem to be more friendly than in Congo. They are much more authoritative there. But here . . . you contribute, you become more friends, which is, for me, very positive . . . . You build a course together. You also bring your findings, your discovery on the table. And also I like small classes. . . . It's give good room for good interaction [*sic*]. (M. Democratic Republic of Congo 2013)

At this university, professors as well as students came from many different educational systems. The variation of standards and expectations between professors confused students. Standards for referencing and writing papers varied from professor to professor. One student observed, "You can have different lecturers; everyone . . . has his own system of writing papers, even of referencing. . . . We are using Turabian as a main, but some are like parenthetical, some footnotes" (M. Nigeria 2013).

Organization and coordination of programs was inconsistent. Sometimes courses were not offered in the expected time, causing students to over-stay. Some students felt that professors seemed relatively free to teach as they liked, without much coordination or accountability from the broader system. Some professors sent syllabi out irregularly, without much time to prepare read and write papers for seminar classes. They wanted clearer instruction. One student complained, "You keep saying, 'write a good paper.' That is somehow confusing . . . but if you give me guidelines, follow these guidelines correctly, then I can do better" (T. Tanzania 2013).

Level of learning.

Of course, students felt the difference when they entered into graduate, compared with undergraduate studies. Most lecturers pushed them to think more independently and more critically. While this was demanding, they appreciated this approach. At the other end of the spectrum, students had a few teachers who

just gave out basic information, did not challenge them, and did not seem prepared to teach at the necessary level. Students varied in their level of preparedness for studies. For some, many classes built on their bachelor's studies. For others, the topics were entirely new. This necessitated that teachers review basic concepts before moving on.

> One of the least favorite has also been the best. There was one particular assignment where we really were pushed . . . using only primary sources . . . we were just groping in the dark to try and figure it out and produce a decent paper, so that was a really tough exercise, but it was also one of the best learning experience, without very much guidance . . . so it was just kind of being thrown into the deep end . . . Most of it was on our own. (P. Canada 2013)

Heavy work load.

Nearly all of the students found the work load and pace daunting. The amounts and levels of reading and writing, along with the proofreading and editing required, shocked many students, although they had expected a challenge.

> The whole of the first year, I would say that I didn't learn much, because it was just like cramming knowledge in class and even writing papers without digesting. . . . We were given a lot of stuff in a very short period, so before you will digest that, the term is over. You're given another pile of courses and by the end of the day, I didn't know if I was learning. (D. Malawi 2013)

Students coped with the work load by getting advice, praying, learning to manage their time, and developing their study skills. Some determined to persevere. Though it cost their grades, some overloaded their schedules to finish early, especially if their spouses were ready to return home. Others stayed because they dreaded the shame and disappointment they would cause to their families and sponsors if they quit. Some took fewer courses or cut out other activities, such as socializing or time with family. Many found that gradually, they grew accustomed to the system (including the professors' accents and expectations) and they learned to study more effectively.

New study skills were required. Some students come to school with fewer basic study skills than their colleagues, so they were more overwhelmed. For instance, some had to learn how to use computers, the library, and internet resources.

> I struggled like the first three terms. I was like totally confused between the IT, and the library, and the classes and actually in my undergraduate we don't use computers. This was one of the hard things. Sometime I can write and in the middle of my assignment, I lost it. You can just feel the frustration. (L. Democratic Republic of Congo 2013)

Many had to learn to write better and to read faster and more selectively. One student had never done a book review. Others learned about plagiarism the hard way. E-learning was new to many. One noted, "We have been raised in a culture where story-telling is very important . . . you have to ask him [the teacher] questions or her questions. But in e-learning . . . actually it's good, but it is quite challenging" (I. Tanzania 2013). They appreciated learning to do e-learning, but they also missed face-to-face interaction with their lecturers.

Communication Issues and Language Skills

Cultures of communication relate to the ways in which people express and interpret ideas in their cultures (Cortazzi & Jin 1997:76). Language proficiency can be a major stress point for international students, but the actual communication problems can be much deeper, relating to the content being communicated, not just the way in which it is being communicated (Egege & Kutieleh 2004:75–76; Hofstede 1986:314–316; Lacina 2002:22). Like many other international students elsewhere, graduate students had to learn new communication skills. Academic writing and critical thinking challenged many.

English difficulties.

English plagued many students, especially those who had not schooled much in English previously. This language difficulty was compounded by the high level of academic work, the different schooling systems, and the heavy work load mentioned above. Students who struggled with English felt disadvantaged compared to other students fluent in English.

> That's another challenge, in fact, to write in a good way, since we are from different countries . . . we don't have English. Our people, they do not speak English But here, since we are from different countries, our teachers, they look to our work, according to their standards or according to the other students, not understanding our problem, or our weakness in English. (E. Ethiopia 2013)

For many students, improving their English and accessing English materials was one of their goals in attending university in Kenya. Some students from Rwanda or the Democratic Republic of Congo had study options in French, but they felt the university in Nairobi was superior. Some sought international friends and attended English church services to improve their fluency.

Cultural Expectations: Roles, Values, and Intercultural Skills

The culture of the learning environment relates to expectations in the classroom, roles of students and teachers, basic values and beliefs regarding learning and teaching. Issues of pedagogy and assessment are also important parts of cultures of learning (Cortazzi & Jin 1997:76, 85).

Credible, diverse faculty.

Though challenging at first, many students came to value the international diversity and exposure from their professors. One student reported, "I've been really blessed by the professors and the range of professors. Like last term, I had a South Korean, Kenyan, West African, and an American … that wouldn't happen in too many other places" (Y. USA 2013). Their different experiences and approaches to teaching enhanced the learning process. A number of professors had been international students. Doctoral students appreciated working with well-known visiting professors/authors. Others liked the credibility of professors who were missionaries teaching missions classes.

Several metaphors surfaced to describe faculty. One was seen as a father who modeled patience and encouraged his students. Others were referred to as elders or gurus.

> He was like a father, a teacher, very encouraging. . . . I like that approach. It challenged myself, if I will be a teacher, or a pastor, tried to care for those who are down, those who they don't think they can do something. So that was a good experience to learn from my lecturer [*sic*]. (P. Tanzania 2013)

Approachable faculty.

Students compared their professors with their past experiences. Most expected more power distances between professors (and their spouses) and students (Hofstede, 1986:307). Most found the faculty friendly, approachable and available.

> This is one university that I learn that it is possible for me to interact with your professors one on one, to take tea together. In my background, is almost impossible … The system here kind of creates an atmosphere where you can chat . . . you can express yourself more freely to the professor. He will even ask you questions . . . It is open and the professors themselves are also hoping to engage you. (M. Nigeria 2013)

Students often found teachers who were willing to mentor them, though not all faculty members were so available. They appreciated being included in conferences and professional networks as well as getting experience teaching and researching with faculty.

> So the faculty, most of them, have been very, very generous and gone out of their way to give advice and counsel outside of the classroom which has been very, very helpful, . . . more mentoring. They have given the students the feeling that we're more like colleagues than a strict teacher-student division . . . I wasn't expecting it would be that collegial. (P. Canada 2013)

Contextualized African teaching.

Having various Africans teaching on African issues within an African context brought authenticity to the learning process. Dealing with real African issues assisted students in thinking through their worldviews and their own responses to these issues. Some noted the mixture of influences on the university (British, American, Kenyan) but they appreciated that faculty dealt with local realities and helped students apply learning in their context. Interestingly, it was mainly Western students and faculty who wished for more African authors on the syllabi.

> But coming here to this school … I found it taking me back to my roots . . . the courses that I've taken here, the lecturers. They really push us back to our African roots to value our culture, to appreciate a lot of cultural aspects of our communities. (D. Malawi 2013)

Learning in an international community.

In addition to faculty, students appreciated the community of learning and their fellow students. Small class sizes lent themselves to frequent discussions in class. They learned from each other's experiences and perspectives, in class and outside of class. As one student expressed this, "I've really appreciated knowing classmates. . . . It's been really good, the benefits of learning here and understanding spiritual points of view from classmates. That's been really rich" (Y. USA 2013).

Living on campus gave students numerous opportunities to interact. They made friends and developed international networks. Learning and living in an international, inter-denominational community also required some adjustments. For example, it did not take too long to learn new ways of greeting friends but it took a long time to feel really greeted in the new way.

> You get to know how other people approach life from their different countries and how they see what you don't see, through interaction with one another, learning from what they are doing out there to their countries, how they approach life, how they see things, their system in education. (P. Tanzania 2013)

Summary and Discussion of Findings

International Student Research

In summary, these international students experienced many issues common to international students elsewhere, but they also faced some unique situations.

Like others, they were initially quite disoriented by the different system of learning they met. The case study university's unique mix of international influences (American, British, and Kenyan) confounded the issue. As in other places, the new role expectations of teachers and students mystified many at first. A study at Trinity International University noted similar challenges and benefits for their theological graduate students (Charter, Guth, Lopes, & Theonugraha 2010).

Other internationals struggled to learn to think critically and write academically. Teaching these explicitly, as helpful tools to survive university, often helped students grasp them (Egege & Kutieleh 2004:77–81; Davies 2006:16–37). While students were expected to take a class in writing, it was not enough for many. More support (writing center, tutoring, proofreading) was needed than was available at the university. Like others, language difficulties plagued many throughout their studies. They may have had less English support than at some other bigger, more resourced international universities (Cammish 1997:143–146). Perhaps to boost enrollment, some students were admitted with seemingly low English skills, which contributed to low learning levels and poor grades, especially at first. Still, nearly all gradually improved their English.

Generally, Kenyans were seen to be quite friendly and helpful when approached. Internationals sometimes had to pursue contacts with them, but the gap seemed smaller with hosts than in many of the other studies. These international students also reported less racism, although some Westerners felt some xenophobia (Terkla et al. 2007:1; Zhao & Wildemeersch 2008:57). Off campus, African internationals also felt some discrimination, especially if they could not speak Kiswahili. Like other sojourners around the world, they felt lonely, missed home, and experienced culture shock. As in other places, many struggled immensely with finances, as support sometimes dropped off and they could not rely on family members or church members to help from afar.

Like other internationals, students encountered cultural differences in class and living on campus, such as variations in time/event orientations, individual/communal orientations, power distance variations, and varying levels of tolerance towards ambiguity (Hofstede 1986:307–310). Though uncomfortable, they tried to adapt to some of these differences. For example, individualistic students learned to appreciate study groups. Teachers were more approachable and accessible than students from high power distance cultures expected, but before long, they appreciated this. Deadlines were renegotiated with teachers. Students requested more specific guidelines when needed.

Like many internationals, they broadened their perspectives and networks by studying at this university. Close, continual interactions with fellow students and faculty influenced these changes. Students appreciated the African focus of their studies, which was not the case for many international students studying abroad (Hyams-Ssekasi 2012:197; Noronha 1992:57–58; Barker 1997:109–112).

Multicultural Pedagogies

Many experts recommend becoming a critically reflective teacher to improve one's teaching of international students. Hofstede recommends teachers must first understand their own cultures and then recognize that others learn in different ways. His anthropological approach to teaching embraces the world's cultural variety (1986:316). To do this, teachers must examine their own assumptions. Cortazzi and Jin advocate aiming for *cultural synergy* when teaching, where teachers and students try to understand the other's principles of interpretation. Teachers and students can learn from each other while still maintaining and affirming each other's cultural identity (1987:88–89). They must recognize the cultural underpinnings of their own teaching and assessments, including their subliminal expectations. They then must reflect on how these may affect others from different groups. This can help teachers decide what is essential and what can be adapted to suit the needs of their students. Being explicit also helps students to understand expectations and to express their learning (Carroll 2005:27–28; Ryan 2005:96; Weinstein & Obear 1992:41–61; Ramsay 2005:22; Ford & Dillard 1996: 232–236; Banks 2001:64; McLaren & Sleeter 1995:35–45; Gorski 2010:2–4).

Pedagogical Implications

Teachers play a critical role in facilitating international graduate student learning. Their attitude, modeling, and competence are critical for learning. Below are some suggestions for teachers of graduate students at Christian universities in Nairobi, based on the follow-up study of internationals and faculty.

Academic Expectations and Study Skills

- Learn about different educational systems (e.g. British, Arabic, French, Ethiopian).
- Explore students' past experiences and expectations for student and teacher roles.
- Teach needed competencies (e.g. academic writing and critical thinking) explicitly.
- Grade mostly for content. Correct writing and grammar, in increasing detail.
- Keep explicitly educating on plagiarism.
- In thesis writing, go slowly, even paragraph by paragraph, if needed.
- Be patient.
- Help students develop confidence academically. Reward positive steps.
- Give examples of excellent work.
- Give clear guidelines and expectations for learning and assessments.
- Prioritize the most important readings and assignments.
- Help students access resources (e.g. more books on reserve, online resources)

Communication Issues and Language Skills

- Speak clearly, slowly and audibly. Be aware of your accent. Don't mix in Kiswahili.
- Write the main points when lecturing. Give notes and/or use powerpoint.
- Refer students to language support services (e.g. English, writing centers).
- Give students simple books to read for practice.

- Encourage them to have a dictionary or electronic translation device handy.
- Teach students presentation skills.
- Learn some greetings in students' languages.
- Be humble, accessible, and approachable. Encourage them to ask questions.

Cultural Expectations: Roles, Values, and Intercultural Skills

- Recognize culture shock and transition overload. Give extra grace at first.
- Be aware of different expectations of power distance, ambiguity, time orientation, individualism versus communalism, and ascribed versus achieved authority (e.g. be careful of correcting elders in groups).
- Learn about students' contexts and roles. Help them apply their learning to these.
- Critically reflect on your own values, beliefs, experiences and teaching practices.
- Utilize the international community as a learning environment.
- Use disorienting situations for learning.
- Be a role model and mentor.
- Be self-aware and Holy-Spirit aware. Let the Holy Spirit teach.
- Show you care, holistically (ask about family, give credit to call home, visit them, help them financially, lend books, listen, or pray with them).
- Treat students as adults. Engage students.
- Avoid local jokes. Give appropriate examples.
- Encourage students to learn from each other (i.e., discussions, small groups). Use oral and social methods.

- Use a variety of methods. Mix lectures with practical activities.
- Help students apply content to their contexts (e.g. Africa, country).
- Give case studies or have them share their experiences.
- Drink tea, eat together, host students at home and discuss life issues.

Notes

Some of the content of this paper was presented at the International Conference on Education in Nairobi, Kenya in July 2015.

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All interview quotations use a pseudonym to protect the privacy of the student. Interviews conducted by Janice R. H. Rasmussen:

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